

Leadership, excellence and the marginalisation of refugees in Higher Education

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Plans to close the CEU's Open Learning Initiative
reveal some of the glaring contradictions within
current HE discourses

In 2017, Central European University's (CEU) leadership - along with its students, staff, alumni and supporters - was asking the world to 'stand with CEU' after its existence in Hungary was threatened by aggressive legislation from Viktor Orbán's government. The legislation was ostensibly about regulation of higher education in the country, but its only target was this particular private American university founded by the regime's bogeyman, Hungarian-American speculator turned philanthropist George Soros. There were sustained protests and a massive online petition in support of CEU, which ensured that the plight of the university and the campaign to allow it to remain in Hungary received substantial local and international media coverage. With challenges to the legislation

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unresolved, and impediments to the institution's ability to recruit students to its American-only accredited programmes ongoing, in 2019 the leadership decided to move CEU to Vienna.

In 2023, supporters of the Open Learning Initiative (OLive) - an access programme for displaced people including refugees and asylum seekers - were asking the world to 'stand with OLive' - after the CEU leadership made a surprise announcement that OLive would close at the end of the academic year. The decision was ostensibly about consolidating access programmes at the university, but its immediate target was this specific initiative founded by staff and migrant solidarity groups in 2015 to provide education opportunities for the increasing numbers of displaced people in Hungary. There were sustained protests and a massive online petition in support of OLive, with some 1,400 signatories. The attack on the initiative and the campaign to allow it to remain at CEU again received local and international media coverage. Though it has more students than ever before and a healthy track record of securing external funding, OLive continues to struggle to exist within the hostile anti-migrant situation in Hungary, and the hostile anti-access programme situation at CEU.

CEU was established in 1991, constructed around a geopolitical mission in which higher education was imagined as a collective good, driven by a strong liberal public purpose of strengthening liberal democracy in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. It sought to do this through offering free and generously funded US-style education and degree accreditation, mostly in the social sciences, to graduate students, as part of the larger project of creating an 'open society'. CEU's unique story, as it changed from being a mission-driven university in the post-socialist space, backed by the deep pockets of its founder, to become an(other) American private university in Central Europe without a clear mission or focus, is not (just) another story of neoliberalism corrupting all it touches; it is, rather, a story about notions of Leadership and Excellence, and the ways in which they are understood and operationalised in relation to marginalised groups of students - including refugee learners.

The creation of OLive at CEU is testament to the possibilities that once existed at a higher education institution whose mission and focus went beyond tuition fees and university rankings. However, the hostility OLive has faced also reveals contradictions: the open society CEU sought to create was predicated

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on the production of an intellectual elite - with whom extremely marginalised populations were always going to be likely to have an awkward relationship; and refugee access programmes were only meant to be a temporary response to a 'crisis' that would be soon resolved. Meanwhile, academic communities, already under threat from an increasingly individualised understanding of what it is to be a scholar, were drawing boundaries around who should (professors) and who should not (precarious staff) speak; finally, programmes that aimed at opening up the university to groups like displaced people were seen as being staffed by those who did not 'know their place' within the university hierarchy, and had failed to show due deference to university leadership.

The contradictions inherent in running a refugee education programme at a locally prestigious university in crisis were structured by a number of broader frames prevalent in higher education today: the emerging formations of power and authority embodied in the principles of 'leadership' and the pursuit of 'excellence' as the means of institutional salvation.

In the following sections, we first trace the rise and fall of OLIVE and its contingent place within the organisational life of CEU. Then we examine the institutional significance of 'leadership' as a way of imagining and organising power within the university (and other organisations), before examining what is at stake and who is left out in the pursuit of 'excellence'. We also point to the devaluation of marginalised actual and potential students who are deemed 'out of place' in the excellent university. We conclude by asking what lessons might be learned from the trajectory of OLIVE.

An OLIVE story

Like all stories, the OLIVE story has a number of beginnings, depending on whom one asks. The most prominent story is intertwined with a proclaimed crisis. In the summer of 2015, the Hungarian government, along with other European governments, manufactured a political, cultural and existential crisis out of the fact that people, largely from the Middle East, were moving to Europe and seeking entry to the European Union (or, the more salubrious parts of the EU). This constructed crisis led to a whirlwind of interventions of groups and individuals caught up in, and trying to find a perspective from which to respond to, the damaging and violent narrative of the Hungarian government and the ways it affected the people moving.

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Finding a position from which to respond to the often overwhelming and powerful narrative with its many contours was not easy, but the arrival of the ‘migrant crisis’ in Budapest led to conversations between local migrant solidarity activists and members of CEU staff about what part the university might play.¹

Those conversations came to connect to other questions about the university, notably: who has access to the university, and what, if anything, should be the public role of the university? By 2015, aspects of CEU’s original mission as part of the ‘post-socialist transition’ were under strain due to a mix of factors, including pressures from the Hungarian government (which eventually led to the university leaving the country), budgetary stresses, and the changing socio-economic situation of countries in eastern Europe.

A number of people involved in thinking about how a university might respond to displaced people in 2015 had worked in the CEU Roma Graduate Preparation Programme, a year-long intensive language, skills and disciplinary training for students from the marginalised Roma community who wished to enter graduate study. These CEU members were also invested in the scholarly and political challenges of how to ‘open up’ the university.² OLIVE emerged from these connections and challenges, to pose the question of how a university could respond to the maelstrom of the crisis narrative in relation to displaced people in Hungary, and how it could do so by re-invigorating ideas about access and the university’s public purpose. OLIVE’s education programmes started - in association with Migszol, the Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary - in January 2016, and aimed to create a politically and ethically informed learning space where students could develop critical thinking skills, marketable skills (like languages, or IT literacy for example), and, for some, the chance to move on to degree programmes at universities (at CEU and elsewhere).

Initially, the programme received widespread support at the university, including from the university leadership. OLIVE students were often asked to appear as part of CEU’s promotional materials, the Rector at the time came to welcome new cohorts of students, and people went out of their way to be flexible and accommodating to the new addition to the student body. However, as it became clearer that OLIVE was not a short-term response to a ‘crisis’, and, rather, sought to open up the university in a more sustained way for displaced people, enthusiasm amongst the leadership waned. This was especially the case after the Hungarian government introduced hostile legislation that required organisations who helped ‘migrants’, including through

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education, to pay 25 per cent of their turnover to fund border policing, something that pushed CEU's leadership into suspending OLive in 2018. They created a new legal entity to run OLive so as to create a firewall between 'refugee education' and the rest of the university. This had the effect of placing the programme in legal and institutional precarity, and gave the leadership greater control over OLive than it did over other academic units. This all took place when CEU itself was in conflict with the Hungarian state (as mentioned above). By 2021, the university leadership had moved all degree teaching to Vienna, which is now its main home. The legislation targeting CEU has since been struck down by the European Court of Justice, and the legislation targeting organisations who help 'migrants' has, to the best of our knowledge, never been used (certainly never against OLive). Nevertheless, CEU had already moved most of its teaching to Vienna, and OLive in Budapest remained housed in a non-profit company owned by CEU.

However, OLive's location within a peripheral legal entity, and its declining support from the leadership, and even the move to Vienna of most of CEU's activities, did not necessarily mean that OLive would end. OLive has always been extremely successful in securing external funding through European Commission and private foundation grants (having been granted around 2 million euros since its inception). It also increased its student numbers, receiving its largest ever number of applications in the 2022/23 academic year, in which it ran three programmes with some 100 students, making it larger than most CEU academic units. OLive students thus constituted the largest group of students that remained at the Budapest campus (though some CEU actors struggled to see them as such, and often complained that there were 'no students' on the campus any more). The success of OLive was due, in large part, to the support it received in Hungary from its alumni, civil society, committed volunteers, and others who worked in solidarity; this helped to keep the programme alive and growing in spite of internal and external pressures. But in 2023 this programme - which had started with a fanfare, survived hostile legislation from the Hungarian state, brought money into the university, and was growing in size and scope each year, was shut down. This is because - as we show below - an initiative like OLive disrupts the paradigm of 'excellence' that has been taken on board by the CEU university leadership - in common with most universities across Europe and North America. CEU, having become unmoored from its origins in fostering access, increasingly seeks to construct a concept of 'excellence' as the defining principle of its project.

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What sort of leaders does excellence create?

Historically, universities were - at least in theory and at least in the Anglo-Saxon world - presided over by a senior academic (the Rector or Vice-Chancellor), who embodied in his (more rarely her) person the university community. They acted as *primus inter pares* (first among equals), and governed with the presumed (and sometimes demanded) consent of the academic community. From the late 1980s, however, this model became subject to new pressures, as universities encountered pressures to neoliberalise and managerialise, in keeping with most public service organisations in the anglosphere.³ These changes were intended to stimulate (or simulate) competition through the use of market-like arrangements which would drive organisational dynamism.

This combination of markets and managers wrought profound changes on the functioning and culture of universities, with severe implications for residual forms of academic freedom and autonomy, while cultivating a new relationship to students as customers or consumers. Academic staff were re-imagined as employees to be managed, and students reinvented as consumers to be provided with 'experiences', 'journeys' and 'satisfaction' (to be evaluated through recurrent surveys). The managerialisation of the university - as with other organisations - centred on clearing the ground for the exercise of the 'right to manage', notably by dissolving the 'academic community' that grounded the university and gave it its ethos.⁴ Managerialism constructed another form of rule and coordination in its stead, and enabled the next development in this process of organisational transformation: the emergence of *leaderism* and the cult of the leader.⁵

'Leadership' became the focal idea for organisational transformation at a time when organisations were represented as encountering unstable, competitive and dangerously turbulent environments. Only by concentrating the powers of strategic direction in one person could the crises that universities faced be safely navigated. Taking time to collectively deliberate on direction, policy or academic choices risked losing momentum, slowing progress, or, worst of all, creating confusion and uncertainty. The model of leadership remakes the internal order and culture of the university in crucial ways - and becomes expressed in the touchstone of the pursuit of *Excellence*.⁶ Excellence became the rhetorical cornerstone of organisational transformation in a competitive world (and competition for universities is now both global and national).

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The idea of 'excellence' gave a moral force to arguments about universities, how they should be governed and who should be admitted. Excellence, in combination with recourse to the apparently expert knowledge of managers and ideological auditors in the guise of an external Board or Council, became a route to shut down other imaginaries of the university, and to dismiss ways the university had previously functioned as outmoded at best. Who dares argue against excellence? Only the non-excellent. The trope of excellence creates a moral economy, giving an unwarranted force to ideas about admissions, curricula and budgets that are claimed to drive 'excellence'. This all leads to a further concentration of decision-making power in leaders, the technical experts they gather around them, and the ideological bloc represented in many cases by a 'Board', external to the university but constructing its philosophies, ideas and moral economies. The Board (or Council) is staffed by 'prestigious' individuals who represent the modern pantheon: business and technology moguls, financiers, and, indeed, the academics who speak their language. Technical experts are not only career managers or administrators; they are also, increasingly, academics with sufficient prestige capital, enthralled by 'excellence' and the possibilities of influence. In the process, they lend a certain veneer of corporate respectability to the Leader and their vision of the university.

Like many moral economies, universities today, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, are geared to the interests of the elite. In universities this takes the form of two types of capital accumulation - the cultural capital of prestige and the more straightforward money form of capital. University leaders and prestigious academics who have demonstrated 'excellence' receive eye-watering salaries. The onset of neoliberalism has marketised universities; the modern university must, it is said, take into account the competition and retain their prestigious people. Modern universities shaped by this model of leadership and tropes of excellence attempt to bring into being worlds based on control over cultural narratives (about excellence) and finances (who decides on budgets, where resources are distributed).

This makes the university a site of conflicting imaginaries, moral economies and varieties of power and authority, and also sets the ground for attempts to control the resulting conflicts by consolidating power in the person of the Leader and their supporters. The trajectory of OLIVE - and the resistance to efforts to close it - demonstrates the unfinished character of this transition. Other ways of imagining the university and its relation to society, other ways of valorising education

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(beyond excellence and excellently high fees), and other ways of administering the organisation (beyond the business model), remain in play. But in this context, leaders struggle to find a place within their imaginary of an ideal university for those they consider 'non-excellent'.

While there is occasionally space to operationalise the cultural capital of the 'excellent' or 'superstar' refugee, there is little space for those from displaced backgrounds who may or may not achieve 'excellence' as students, those who are not given the opportunity to be average (as 'regular' students are) - not least due to dominant expectations of gratitude, which impose a 'duty' to perform above and beyond. Such imaginaries of how those from displaced backgrounds may be included within a university reveal the limits of leaderism and its obsession with excellence. They also run counter to the experiences and needs of students who have experienced displacement, further displacing them from the university in multiple ways.

Who is left out by imaginaries of excellence?

Universities work on assumed temporalities, both in terms of everyday routines and how a particular student's life trajectory entwines with their time at any given education institution. Within the increasingly measured and quantified organisational structures of higher education, there is less and less space for those who, for whatever reason, may not be able to align their rhythms to those of the institution's expectations. Many lives cannot be made to fit straightforwardly into university temporalities, and this leads to deeply-layered disconnections. Other disconnections stem from geopolitical inequalities, where qualifications from some countries are not recognised in others - typically qualifications of those from the South in the North; and as displaced people move, these difficulties contribute to their forcibly *arrhythmic* lives.

The university's temporal principles and expectations of patterns of study mean that each semester/term, week and day is organised as if attending university is the singular most important aspect of any given individual's life. While there may be some leeway to negotiate 'exceptional circumstances', this is often of little comfort to those who face ongoing daily exceptional circumstances - as displaced students do. Their ability to focus and live up to the image of the ideal student may be affected by immigration concerns; poverty and the concomitant need to work while studying;

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trauma; lack of parental support (material or otherwise); and ongoing events 'back home'. 'Irregular students' struggle to fit into the regulatory timeframes and processes of neoliberal academia.

Such pressures are intensified by two critical limitations within the dominant temporal framings of displacement that have been adopted by states, international organisations and universities: first, there is an assumption that exile is temporary, or that those termed refugees will be granted settled status somewhere; and second, there is an assumption that the current 'wave' of displacement is exceptional and short-lived, i.e., it forms a crisis that requires a crisis response. Such thinking leads universities and others to develop short-term projects to help with integration or provide limited education. These are almost always framed and formed as 'projects' - the temporary form deemed to be most appropriate for those adjustments to the normal life of the university made in response to crisis or emergency conditions.⁶

These framings enable university leaders both to allow a programme like OLIVE to come into being - as a response to the 'migration crisis' from around 2015 - and to feel anxious about what they had imagined to be a short-term response having a continuing life. Violent and disruptive events, such as the continuing conflicts in Syria, the Taliban's retaking of Afghanistan in 2021, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have not come to an end: and they have led to more displaced people arriving in Hungary, and, in many cases, turning to OLIVE. Programmes such as OLIVE thus co-exist with deep uncertainty about their relationship to these imagined crisis temporalities - and their presumption of temporariness.

Two important consequences flow from these 'projectised' arrangements. First, programmes like OLIVE are only contingently integrated into the university's structures, systems and culture, with all the implications this has for their funding, administration and sustainability. They are add-ons, rather than systematically integrated. Second, the students enrolled into such programmes are ambiguously placed - attached to, but not part of, the 'academic community' of the university. Such institutional arrangements add another twist to the multiple displacements of marginalised people.

In the pursuit of excellence, such organisational and personified untidiness threatens the university's core mission. Programmes that are not fully integrated are untidy and difficult to manage, and distract organisational attention from the pursuit of the core business. Similarly, students who are out of place (not attached to

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the established programmes) risk ‘diluting’ the excellence of the student body: they embody the wrong characteristics and lack the virtues that are sought after in the competitive pursuit of excellence. Small wonder, then, that the increasingly single-minded pursuit of excellence seeks to purify the university (and the student body) from these untidy - and unproductive/unprofitable - elements.

The dyad of excellence/non-excellence has a number of purposes. One is to limit entry to students who don’t fit the university’s regulated temporalities. A second is to give strength to and make coherent the trope of excellence through its contrast with its opposite. Defining and policing the boundaries of excellence helps give a dynamic life to the idea, creating a tenacious commitment to the pursuit of excellence, particularly when it is seen to be under threat by the presence of the non-excellent. A third purpose is to enable non-dangerous ways of incorporating the ‘non-excellent’. ‘Projectising’ access programmes like OLIve makes them manageable: their disruptive effects can be contained; they are named as humanitarian, something the university willingly does out of charity when required as special extensions of its core activities (and its underlying moral economies). Those moral economies also enable universities to make useful publicity and moral capital from these exceptions: it appears that donors, particularly those of large American-based foundations, appreciate a commitment to the other, to charity, and to doing good. Universities have capitalised on projectising, isolating, containing and provincialising programmes that demonstrate the kindness of the excellent towards the other.

Conclusion: openings amidst the failures of excellent leaders

The strategy of being excellent in one’s charity in the short term towards a group of people who should be grateful at arm’s length in the long term becomes problematic when a Leader wants to close down the programmes that serve these groups in the name of creating a more excellent institution. Access initiatives such as OLIve may be bringing in money to the university, increasing the student intake and creating a growing positive reputation across Europe, but they can become a threat to the coherence of the institution’s ‘mission’. The CEU leadership gave notice in January 2023 that it would shut down OLIve at the end of the academic year. There was no consultation with stakeholders, and the process made use of external evaluations whose commissioning and methodologies still remain unclear, and

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which were deployed selectively while not being publicly available. The decisions have led to months of student protests, international condemnation from the academic community, and widespread disruption across the university, supposedly paralysing its decision making. CEU, which once was able to lay claim to being both exceptionally excellent in the Hungarian context and morally upright in its battle with the Hungarian state, now finds itself needing to make an urgent choice about its identity and purpose. The signs are that the university is doubling down on its ambition to construct 'excellence', with, we fear, further reverberations for those deemed to be out of place in this moral economy, unless the contradictions in this process can be stimulated to re-open CEU's historical commitment to access.

In this article we have traced the mixture of conditions and causes that resulted in CEU striving to abolish OLIVE. We have explored the ways in which the larger dynamics of HE (moves towards marketisation and managerialisation) were enacted and embodied within CEU's approach to refugee education, which was itself conditioned by the strange national (and multinational) formation and trajectory of CEU, involving both the contested visibility of migrants/displaced people as educational subjects and the shifting mission of the university itself. The critical points in these trajectories involve the internal reconfiguration of power and authority within the institution in the cult of the Leader and the imaginary of excellence as the sole route to competitive success.

In these conditions both marginalised students and marginalised academic programmes like OLIVE are at risk: they are untidy. They are made to be out of place and ill-fitting in an institution that has narrowed down its historical mission and is now striving to represent itself as globally excellent and seeking to enrol the 'brightest and the best'. Such students and programmes cannot be accommodated in a strategic focus on the 'core business'.

This account risks being one more addition to the litany of stories about how neoliberalism ruined the university. There are good reasons for writing such a tale - it captures many of the dynamics in play, it is a way of dealing with the contemporary brutalism of public policy across many sites and it points to the embodied TINA approach of contemporary leaderism - the zealotry that can brook no opposition. However, frustrated though we are, we do not think that is the correct conclusion to our analysis. Instead, we want to suggest that OLIVE (and its equivalents elsewhere) deserve to be fought for - and that there are grounds on

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which such battles may still be fought.

There is opportunity within the alarming emptiness of *the rhetoric of excellence*. Given that most institutions claim they are striving to be excellent, there is clearly some room for competitive failure. How does the university react when it fails to be excellent, to recruit excellent students, to retain excellent staff or achieve excellent financial results? One well-established response is to pursue what might be called 'niche excellence' - we are excellent at things that no-one else has tried. So, in theory, becoming world class at providing education for displaced or marginalised populations remains one potential (and less contested) route to excellence.

Such strategies to refine the institutional mission can never be merely discursive. Rather, they require sites of strain and fissure within the institution on which to work. Such possibilities frequently emerge from a commonplace mixture of contradictions and crises within such excellence-pursuing institutions. In CEU's case, the traces of a historical commitment to access cannot be easily marginalised. Constant recalculation and repositioning produces sites of tension and conflict within the institution, which increasingly finds itself without trusted institutional means to manage them, or the capacity to reconcile competing claims and demands. The distribution of material rewards and punishments - often through a stressed and creaking management system - forms a landscape in which internal and external solidarities may be remade.

In such conditions, the residual resources of older imaginaries of the university may be revitalised. The idea of the university as an academic community has regularly been renewed as a defence against leaders and their 'grand plans', particularly when the future of the institution is at risk. One of us previously worked in a university that passed a vote of 'no confidence' in a Vice-Chancellor apparently committed to implementing a potentially destructive leadership vision. (He subsequently resigned from the UK's Open University in April 2018.) For CEU, perhaps the way forward is an active reinvigoration of its mission to foster access, conceived and imagined by a broad community of academics.

Finally, there are questions about the reputational struggles at stake in the desire to be excellent. In times of permanent crisis, in a world of displaced populations, and a condition of cut-throat university competition, there are serious questions about how to make university education open and accessible to the many, rather than just the few. The Open Learning Initiative offered one example of how to re-

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imagine the place of the university in this world - and the questions that it posed about the value, purpose and quality of the university will not go away. It may even be that OLIve can serve as an inspiration for something new.

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Notes

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2. C. Cantat, I.M. Cook and P.K. Rajaram (eds), *Opening Up the University: Teaching and Learning with Refugees*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books 2022.
3. For example, S. Hyatt, B. Shear and S. Wright (eds), *Learning Under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2015.
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5. D. O'Reilly and M. Reed, "'Leaderism": An Evolution of Managerialism in UK Public Service Reform', *Public Administration*, Vol 88 No 4, 2010, pp960-78.
6. T. Peters and R. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run*

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7. Projectisation has been critically discussed in policy and development studies but also applies to organisational structuring: see, for example, N. Malik and A. Rana, 'Civil society in Pakistan: an exclusive discourse of projectization', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 44, 2020, pp41-56; and T. Mora a and P. Stubbs, 'The limits of projects: translating the social inclusion of Roma in Serbia', in I. Fylling, E. Baciu and J. Paulsen Breimo (eds), *EU Social Inclusion Policies in Post-Socialist Countries: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Perspectives on Implementation*, London, Routledge 2019, pp35-54.